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Fall 10-1-2004

Writing Sample

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Excerpt from A Brahmin from Katmandu.

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Recommended Citation

Jaafar, Khalid, "Writing Sample" (2004). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 97.
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Khalid JAAFAR

Fragment from the novel *A Brahmin from Katmandu*

Synopsis: The story is about a man fleeing to Katmandu to avoid religious persecution in his homeland Malaysia, where he has been accused of promoting heresy by the Islamic religious authority. While in Katmandu he studies Sanskrit. But at the center of the story is also a brahmin youth coming to Malaysia in search of employment. While in Malaysia he has an affair with a frustrated woman who also happens to be the wife of an inspector with the secret police. As an act of revenge the inspector has the brahmin boy arrested for drug trafficking which in Malaysia carries mandatory death sentence. The boy escapes the death sentence through bribery, and is deported back to Nepal.

[...]

Why am I in Katmandu? A long story. If the question is what I am doing in Katmandu it would be easy to answer. But “why?” is a query that can’t be answered in a single word, two words, or a sentence. If it asked, what I am doing in Katmandu learning Sanskrit, I could answer. I could also say “business,” but that would be a lie. I am not a businessman. Couldn’t be a businessman. I tried it once. The result was loss, not just a lack of returns, investment depleted, debt even. I could also answer “leisure.”

Why? A difficult question. A deep one, a question that seeks to shred the veil of life, not just life but being itself. But I will not enter that territory. For now. What’s more, if I begin to tell you’d be bewildered, your head in a spin. I will only answer that which is empirical. Even that is taking it far. Too much for me to unravel. I am no longer young. Have gone a distance in my life. What’s more, I won’t reveal everything. A part of it is deeply personal. I will leave a little for myself alone, for those I permit in and who have a right to those secrets.

Do you see? My hair is partly gray. There are those who claim that my graying is premature. No matter. It is true that I am no longer young. I wish I was still young, for there remains much that I want to explore. At present, I am racing with time. I won’t win. But I will continue to race. At times, I think: wouldn’t it be good if I could turn back time. Or I could invoke the Goddess of Time to reverse time for me, or upon death I could be brought to life again, or reincarnated with a continued consciousness; but death and a new life with a consciousness that begins from the beginning is of no worth either. We only live once, though. Once this life is over, it is over! At times, I ponder. If only I had the awareness I have now when I was 20 or 15 years old. I would be a great person in this world.

Like it or not I have to accept the facts. I am 50 years old. how much longer will I live? 10 years, 15, 20. Perhaps even 25 years. I figure that’s sufficient. I could get the fulfillment I want, as long as I don’t pour salt into the water I drink, I guess I will be satisfied. Perhaps I could die even tomorrow. Who knows? All is in the hands of God. Still, I am well. Towards this end, my body is not a barrier. Free of heart problems. Slight diabetes. But I take Dionil, so my sugar level is controlled at 5.7. Ok, no problem. Cholesterol a little high, I visit Dr Khoo whose clinic is in Section 17 Shah Alam, he has been the family doctor since I bought a low-cost house in Section 17, in 1988 I think, and even though I have moved to Bukit

Beruntung, I still consult him for health problems. He advises me to take Lipitor, I take one pill a day, after breakfast. Now my cholesterol is also under control. I do not seek perfect health. That would be impossible. I don't have gout. I have a friend who is a victim of gout; during attacks he can't even move. He is forced to remain at home. Can't head for the library or the book store. The fact is, for my age I am in good health, have strength, and energy for what it is I am seeking.

But my powers of recollection are not strong. Constantly forgetting. The title of books and my favorite authors I can sometime forget, if only for a while. This can annoy me. One night I was feverishly writing an essay. Ideas flowed. I hammered the keyboard of my notebook. I was hammering leftist ideas, socialist ideas. Delightful. Felt "finger lickin' good." I borrowed arguments used by F.A Hayek. These arguments have been already sown in my head since I was a Mass Com student at ITM. I was proud to have been ahead of my time. Who in Malaysia knew of Hayek at that time. The thinker who provided the sulphur for the Thatcher revolution, and later the Reagan revolution in America, and then the fall of the Berlin Wall and later of the Soviet Empire. Very important. I poured forth all the ideas of Hayek, those that I understood completely and ones that I only half understood. About the market, currency, about price controls, unemployment. All of sudden, my fingers froze. I could not recall the title of Hayek's book. I recalled a quotation from Lenin "the best way to sabotage a country is to debauch its currency ..." I could recall the dedication in that book, "To Socialists of All Parties." I could recall the footnotes. The views of Max Eastman, and Peter Drucker quoted in the book...But I could not remember the title of Hayek's book. I could not recall *Road to Serfdom*, the book which made me a right-wing fanatic and a hater of socialism. I rose from my chair, walked back and forth in my room for fifteen minutes attempting to recall the title of that book. I still could not recall *Road to Serfdom*. In the end, I yielded. It was already 2 am. I switched off the light, climbed on to bed and embraced my wife from behind.

There are times when I lose patience with my memory that refuses to cooperate. Ideas flow again. I had a column in a monthly magazine of my own called *Siasab*. Now that magazine has passed away. Pity. I said earlier that I have no talent for business. When the magazine closed, my entire savings were almost depleted and I owed \$65,000 to the printer. How not to lose. 5000 copies printed but only 200 sold. It was a disaster. "Never mind," I told a friend. T.S. Eliot published and served as the editor of the magazine *Criterion* in order to save Europe from its spiritual wasteland following World War I. The magazine sold only 300 copies. I wrote, lustfully berating German philosophy. German philosophy, the longer the words, shorter the meaning. Bombastic terms, purposely invented to provide a veneer of depth and elevation. In truth, no meaning at all. Mere hot air. No substance. I thrashed Hegel, I thrashed Nietzsche. In the end, I so wanted to thrash Heidegger. But how could I speak of this philosopher without mentioning the title of his book, the magnum opus that is synonymous with his name. It was if the title of the book was at the tip of my fingers, but ran from my memory, ran to the seventh layer of my consciousness. I snapped my fingers in the hope that my recollection of the title of that book would rise again to my consciousness. It did not come. I wanted to write about two Heideggers, the elevated intellect alongside the low morals. But I could not mention the title of his book. I wanted to write about his love affair with Hannah Arendt, but I would have to know the title of the book before telling of the love affair. I already scribbled notes about his letter to Hannah and typed "You are my pupil and I your teacher," the professor in arousal and laying the trap, "but that is only the

occasion for what has happened to us.” What did happen between the professor in his late 40s and his virgin female student in her early twenties? I typed again, the letter of the Nazi professor to the virgin Jewess, “I’ll never be able to call you mine, but from now on you will belong in my life and it shall go with you.” What was attractive about Hannah, her mind or her oval face and curly hair? I wrung my brain to remember the title of the book by Heidegger. I couldn’t recall it. “Be happy, that is now my wish for you.” What kind of happiness did the German want to give the Jew? I copied again, but the title still would not come. “Only when you are happy will you become a woman who can give happiness . . .” Hmmm, the professor wanted happiness, happiness from Hannah, happiness from outside of his marriage, an unhappy marriage! I typed all of this in haste. ‘Title! Title! Still it would not come. “And only in that way will you be properly prepared for what the university can and should give you.” The title, the title please! “That is the way of genuineness and seriousness, but in the forced academic activity of many of your sex . . .” Sex, yes, sex, that is what Heidegger wanted from Hannah, he wanted to fondle her breasts, bite down on her nipples and tear through the hymen of the Jew. But I still could not remember the title of the book, I still could not remember *Being and Time*. My patience ended. “Damn you, Nazi” I shouted and slammed my fist hard against the table. The table tremored, the mug of coffee from which I had half drunk bounced, fell on the floor and shattered. My wife started from the bed, sat and prayed, uttering auzubillah, then bismillah, then the Throne verse and wiped her face. She made her way to the bathroom to take a towel and wiped the coffee from the floor. The mug which showed a picture of the two of us, a gift from our seven children in conjunction with our twentieth anniversary, broken. I pushed back the chair, got up and climbed onto the bed. I lay down and pulled up the blanket, covering my whole body. Why does my memory betray me? Why isn’t there a god or goddess of memory? There is Kali, Ganesha, and all the incarnations of Vishnu, but none are the guardians of memory. There is a God of War, Ares, a Goddess of Love, Aphrodite, and Zeus, father to all gods and mortals, who throws thunder. But no god guards memory. If there is a god, or goddess, god or goddess of dual sex who guards memory, I will worship them at the time when the sun rises and sets. But there are none. So I am saved from polytheism.

I have never possessed a photographic memory. Even if I had, of what use would it be? More like a burden. Have you ever heard of a genius with a photographic memory? Einstein was forgetful. Hermann Kahn admitted to possessing a photographic memory. He was certainly brilliant, wrote a book predicting the emergence of Japan as an economic powerhouse, a futuristic book, but who remembers him now? Moreover, how come he didn’t predict that Japan would face the problem of a “liquidity trap,” like now?

[...]

Translated from the Malay by Eddin Khoo